

## **Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters, Spiritualists, and Theosophists: Esoteric Belief and Practice in the British Parliamentary Labour Party, c1929-c1951**

### **Abstract**

This article explores esoteric identities and cultures in the British Parliamentary Labour Party c1929-c1951. The historiography of the Labour Party has tended to overemphasise the one-dimensional nature of ideological affiliation and identity amongst Labour Members of Parliament in this period along the lines of a rather simplistic left/right dichotomy. Moreover, some historians have suggested that after 1918 particular socialist traditions and currents had become marginalised or dissolved once the party had developed a clearly defined constitution and the experience of political power. The argument presented here is that a range of esoteric identities remained a feature of labour culture through to the general election of 1951 and beyond. Three currents highlight the complexity and fluidity of specific strands of labour/socialist identity; in particular, Spiritualism, Theosophy and belief in the supernatural and the fantastic. Spiritualism and esotericism attracted a range of Labour MPs and shaped their reaction to contemporary political problems and the purpose and direction of working-class politics. An examination of such individuals and beliefs raises some new questions and challenges existing assumptions relating to labour identities in mid-twentieth century Britain. Socialist spiritualists, ghost hunters, and theosophists viewed political identity, mobilisation and practice as an activity that drew as much on the personal, the spiritual and 'other-worldly' as it did on the economic, social and material basis of society.

## Introduction

The first half of the twentieth century has proved to be fertile ground for historians in examining the rise of the Labour Party and its success and failure as an effective ideological and electoral force. This crowded field has produced a range of books and articles by leading scholars such as Ross McKibbin, Duncan Tanner and Andrew Thorpe.<sup>1</sup> Yet much of the existing literature has viewed the party from the perspective of its leading figures or its experiences of government in a period of economic, political and social crisis.<sup>2</sup> The literature has ranged from the institutional (a focus on the origins and development of the party), the political (examining the party, its electoral record and the nature of its ideological identity), the sociological (exploring the party's social and economic grounding in particular localities) and the cultural (attempting to make sense of the politics of the party and its relationship to the shifting geographies and social identities of post-war Britain). Such scholarship has tended to hinge on particular turning points in terms of electoral advance (1906, 1918, 1924, 1929 and 1945), constitutional changes (1918) and significant policy developments (1939-44, 1964-70).<sup>3</sup> Such approaches have resulted in the marginalisation of particular forms of identity and prioritised the economic, the rational, and the material basis of labour politics.<sup>4</sup>

The uncovering of spiritual, theosophical, and counter-cultural currents in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in the period c1929-c1951 deepens our understanding of the ideology of British socialism.<sup>5</sup> It highlights the broader resilience of an aspect of labour culture that remained immune to the materialist convictions of many socialist politicians and trade union leaders. Socialist spiritualists, theosophists, and advocates of the supernatural acted together to develop their own particular brand of labour politics that was underpinned by both a quest for social reform and spiritual enlightenment. In doing so they challenged religious, scientific and political orthodoxies that were shaped by modernisation and the enlightenment tradition.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, they were able to build alliances across party divisions and social classes and used their unorthodox views to challenge conventional thinking on social problems and foreign policy.

Spiritualism, theosophy and engagement with the supernatural and the fantastic in the twentieth century have received only a cursory interest from labour and social historians. In the case of spiritualism, Barrow's research traced the relationship between spiritualists and progressive liberals/socialists but his study ends in 1910.<sup>7</sup> Hazelgrove's work explored the resurgence of spiritualism between the wars, but has nothing to say about its continued

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<sup>1</sup> Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party* (Oxford, 1984); Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party* (Cambridge, 2008); Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For a study that goes beyond a traditional focus see Clare Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent example see John Shepherd, Jonathan Davis and Chris Wrigley (eds) *Britain's Second Labour Government, 1929-31: A Reappraisal* (Manchester, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> A detailed account of the variety of labour identities in the party in the inter-war period is provided by David Howell, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crisis 1922-1931* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Price of the College of Psychic Studies and Paul Gaunt of the Arthur Findlay College have been of great help in locating rare primary sources for this article. Their archival work remains crucial for future researchers in this field of inquiry.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of modernism and the left in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century see Thomas Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism* (Basingstoke, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians 1850-1910* (London, 1986).

presence in the Labour Party.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, occult practices and the doctrines of theosophy in the nineteenth century have generated some scholarship, most notably in the work of Dixon and Owen.<sup>9</sup> Yet such currents/affiliations/beliefs remained a feature of socialist identity in the inter-war period and beyond.

This article extends our understanding of spiritualists and theosophists and their presence in the PLP through to the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> It exposes the complexity of labour identities and the unconventional belief systems that underpinned British socialism. Candidates elected to parliament in the general elections of 1929, 1931, 1935, 1945 and 1950-51 included séance sitters, ghost hunters, spiritualists, theosophists and advocates of the supernatural. They were bearers of a labour identity that remained vibrant, colourful, eccentric and largely immune to the strictures of party orthodoxy in terms of organisation, ideology and established ways of 'doing politics'. Their interventions on issues such as social reform, the politics of gender, religious freedom, popular belief, and secularism formed part of a religious/political culture that sought to build alliances, create pressure groups, and ultimately build a New Britain through economic, social and spiritual development.

### **Séance sitters, ghost hunters, and the road to British Socialism**

The Spiritualist current in the emergence of British socialism in the nineteenth century has been well documented and included a range of figures such as Robert Owen, Keir Hardie, Katherine Glasier and Robert Blatchford.<sup>11</sup> Yet spiritualists and believers in the supernatural and the fantastic retained a presence in the Labour Party through to the 1950s. In the 1929 General Election, Frank Smith, Ernest Bennett and Oliver Baldwin were successfully returned. This was followed by the election of Ernest Marklew in 1935, Tom Brooks in 1942 and George Rogers in 1945.<sup>12</sup> This was a crucial period in which the spiritualist movement was seeking to repeal the Witchcraft Act of 1735 and the Vagrancy Act of 1824, which could be used to prosecute mediums. It was also illustrative of the spiritual aspect of British socialism that remained a source for imagining and advancing a more progressive and counter-cultural form of economic and social organisation. Frank Smith (1854-1940) was the oldest of the group and had associated with other socialists with spiritual leanings in the 1880s including the theosophists, Annie Besant and Herbert Burrows. He was close to Hardie who named him 'St Francis'. Smith and Hardie regularly attended séances and remained convinced of the existence of the supernatural. After Hardie's death in 1915, Smith claimed to be in regular contact with him in the spirit world.<sup>13</sup> Both men had made a

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<sup>8</sup> Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars* (Manchester, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, 2001); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004). See also, Mark Bevir, 'Annie Besant's Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 50, 1 (1999) 62-93; Matthew Beaumont, 'Socialism and Occultism at the *Fin de Siecle*: Elective Affinities', in Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Aldershot, 2012), pp. 165-180.

<sup>10</sup> For insightful histories of spiritualism and mediumship in the nineteenth century see Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1985) and Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Virago, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> For an overview see Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, pp. 112-124; for socialist contact with Hardie after his death Caroline Benn, *Keir Hardie* (London, 1997) chapter 18.

<sup>12</sup> For biographical portraits of some of these figures see Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* Vols. 11-14 (Basingstoke, 2003, 2005, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> For recollections see interview with Robert Blatchford in *Psychic News*, 11 June 1932

pact that whichever of them died first they would endeavour to communicate with the other so as to prove the existence of the afterlife. In a séance with the medium Vout Peters in the 1930s, Hardie contacted Smith providing 'sufficient evidence to convince him of the truth of survival'.<sup>14</sup> In the House of Commons, Smith retained his interest in the spiritual and the esoteric. He was indicative of the current within the inter-war PLP that was critical of the limitations of materialist readings of society. In the pages of *The Two Worlds*, one of the leading spiritualist periodicals, contributors expressed the unison between socialism and spiritualism.<sup>15</sup> An editorial in 1930 proclaimed that 'all people interested in the labour movement ... should be particularly sympathetic to Spiritualism'.<sup>16</sup> This appeared in the context of rising concerns across the political spectrum related to economic decline, unemployment, industrial strife and militarism.

Ernest Bennett (1868-1947) was another Labour MP, self-styled ghost hunter and vice-president of the London Spiritualist Alliance (LSA).<sup>17</sup> He claimed to have seen his first apparition as a young academic at Oxford University.<sup>18</sup> Bennett was influenced by the work of the notable psychical researchers William Crookes and Frederic Myers. He had been active in the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and had sat in séances conducted by some of the most influential mediums of the nineteenth century including Eusapia Paladino and Florence Cook. He also gave lectures on examples of ghosts and hauntings such as the 'phantasmal figures of Crete'.<sup>19</sup> Along with fellow ghost hunter Harry Price, he investigated the mediumship of Stella Cranshaw in 1923. Throughout the investigation of Cranshaw both remained baffled by her seemingly 'genuine' psychic powers.<sup>20</sup> Price claimed that during 'one of these violent manifestations, the table was poised upon two legs, and the ... efforts of Captain Bennett (exerting his entire strength) ... could not shift the table'.<sup>21</sup>

Bennett was elected to Parliament in 1906. After electoral failure in 1918 and 1923 he was returned as Labour candidate for Cardiff Central in 1929.<sup>22</sup> He claimed that there was 'unimpeachable evidence of psychic phenomena'.<sup>23</sup> In 1929 he attended the 'Margery' séances with Price in which they detected fraudulent practice.<sup>24</sup> On 3 March 1934 he contributed to a BBC radio series *Inquiry into the Unknown*. He told listeners that there were many cases of hauntings that 'were clearly not the result of illusion or deception'.<sup>25</sup> In India he investigated cases of poltergeist activity. Bennett felt that in 'some instances it [was]

<sup>14</sup> *Psychic News*, 17 December 1938.

<sup>15</sup> The debate around supporting specific candidates is also expressed in the pages of *Light* throughout 1929.

<sup>16</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 28 February 1930.

<sup>17</sup> In 1955 the LSA became the College of Psychic Science, and this was changed in 1970 to the College of Psychic Studies. For discussion of the delegation see SNU Secretary's Memorandum, Box 1 No. 6, College of Psychic Studies.

<sup>18</sup> *Psychic News*, 1 January 1938.

<sup>19</sup> *Light*, 21 December 1929.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett attended sittings with 'Stella C' on 19 April and 27 September 1923. For reports see material on sittings with Stella C, Harry Price Papers, HPC/3A/1, University of London.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Price, *Stella C: An Account of some original experiments in Psychical Research* (London, 1925) p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> For Bennet's broader politics see entry by David Howell in *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. XIII*.

<sup>23</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 25 November 1932.

<sup>24</sup> 'Margery' also known as Mrs Le Roi Goddard Crandon was a prominent American medium. For an account of the investigation see Paul Tabori, *Harry Price Ghost-Hunter* (London, 1950) chapter 6. For Price's view of 'Margery' see sections in his *Leaves from a Psychist's Casebook* (London, 1933).

<sup>25</sup> The broadcast was published in the introduction to Ernest Bennett, *Apparitions and Haunted Houses: A Survey of the Evidence* (London, 1939), pp. 1-7.

difficult to avoid the belief that some genuinely supernatural activity [was] at work'.<sup>26</sup> In the inter-war period, Bennett and Price played a dual role in legitimating the investigation of ghosts in elite circles and bringing the 'reality' of hauntings to a more general public through radio broadcasts, newspaper articles and books.<sup>27</sup> Price had a high view of Bennett and thought he should have been president of the SPR.<sup>28</sup> They were both members of the Ghost Club, a secretive gathering of politicians, academics, scientists and antiquarians that met over dinner in swanky London restaurants to discuss apparitions, spectres, poltergeists and the occult.<sup>29</sup> According to Price, 'no attempt was made to obtain members' and 'one black ball disqualified'.<sup>30</sup> He became president in 1927 but the club was wound up in 1936 after holding 3840 dinners in its 54 years of existence.<sup>31</sup> Price revived the Club in 1938 with a limited membership of 250.<sup>32</sup> Bennett worked closely with Price in the Ghost Club before it was disbanded again in 1940.<sup>33</sup> He was aware that in the networks he moved in his penchant for the supernormal was treated with some suspicion. He noted that 'in some middle-class circles it is not generally considered good form to mention ghosts'.<sup>34</sup> Yet Bennett found a receptive audience in working-class communities where belief in the supernormal remained a potent aspect of local culture and experience.<sup>35</sup>

Bennett published occasional pieces in the press attacking sceptics who questioned the 'reality' of ghosts.<sup>36</sup> He visited sites of supposed hauntings and apparitions, remaining convinced of their existence.<sup>37</sup> His thoughts on the subject were published in his *Apparitions and Haunted Houses: A Survey of the Evidence* in 1939. Like some other members of the SPR he was prone to patronising working-class spiritualists as somehow lacking in intellectual depth. Yet in his popularisation of ghost sightings he sided with the believers and promoted the legitimacy of both middle and working-class incursions into the supernormal. To Bennett, the most accurate and empirically testable explanation for the appearance of ghosts was that it was a result of a telepathic relationship between the living and the deceased. He believed that 'beyond the portals of death a discarnate mind persists still capable of the conscious transference of thought to a living percipient'.<sup>38</sup> For Bennett, ghost hunting and the validation of the reality of apparitions was part of a broader project that

<sup>26</sup> Ernest Bennett, 'Ghosts and Haunted Houses', in Theodore Bernstein (eds), *Inquiry into the Unknown: A BBC Symposium* (London, 1934), p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> See Joanna Timms, 'Ghost-Hunters and Psychical Research in Inter-war England', *History Workshop Journal*, 74 (1) (2012), pp. 88-104.

<sup>28</sup> For Price on Bennett, see his *Fifty Years of Psychical Research* (London, 1939).

<sup>29</sup> For a brief history of the club including membership lists and original documents see Ghost Club Archive (contents of Wooden Box), July 1938, Add MS 52273, British Library.

<sup>30</sup> Harry Price, *Search for Truth: My Life for Psychical Research* (London, 1942), p. 134.

<sup>31</sup> Roll of Ghosts in the order of their election, Ghost Club Archive, Add Ms 52269 A, British Library.

<sup>32</sup> The archives of the Ghost Club had been held by the LSA of which Bennett was a member until being transferred to the British Library in 1938. However, the British Library decided not to take additional items such as photographs of club members and spirit phenomena.

<sup>33</sup> Price, *Search for Truth*, pp. 134-136.

<sup>34</sup> Ernest Bennett, 'Ghosts and Haunted Houses', p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> Mediums and psychics retained a place in the cultural life of working-class communities in the twentieth century. For an autobiographical recollection see Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Harmondsworth, 1990) also Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British society*, chapter 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Psychic News*, 1 January 1938.

<sup>37</sup> For an example see Bennett's investigation of a violent ghost that attempted to strangle a woman in a North Cheshire village, *The Two Worlds*, 19 May 1939.

<sup>38</sup> Bennett, *Apparitions and Haunted Houses*, p. 376.

could create a new kind of society. He felt that such investigations could 'raise a structure nearer to the heart's desire of those who trust that death is but the portal to another life'.<sup>39</sup>

Timms has argued that inter-war ghost hunters 'were trying to reconnect with an endangered history and culture in the face of rapid modernisation'.<sup>40</sup> Yet it could be also argued that socialist ghost hunters and spiritualists were more specifically aiming to reconnect with a socialist politics that had been diluted by the materialism of party organisations, campaigns and policies. The radical journalist and historian Percy Redfern writing in 1946 noted that 'socialists had turned to the conquest of power ... they concentrated on ideas of arranging society, as if the world were a laboratory and men were things'.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, the spiritual resurgence of a particular strand of British socialism underpinned the political activism of PLP spiritualists in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Spiritualism informed a socialism which was critical of the limitations of the materialism that had become dominant on the British left. Moreover, spiritualist socialists were willing to build new political alliances and create pressure groups in order to preserve the ideal of religious freedom, tolerance, free-thinking and the scientific legitimacy of popular belief in the supernatural.

### **Spiritualist activism and socialist politics on earth and beyond**

In July 1930 a delegation met with John Clynes, the Labour Home Secretary, to press the claims of spiritualists in their campaign for religious freedom.<sup>42</sup> This brought together MPs, journalists, and advocates for spiritualism, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Hannen Swaffer (the self-styled Pope of Fleet Street)<sup>43</sup>, Ernest Oaten of the Spiritualist National Union (SNU), Gordon Lang the Labour MP for Oldham representing independent spiritualists and William Kelly, the Labour MP for Rochdale.<sup>44</sup> The eminent scientist and spiritualist Sir Oliver Lodge sent his best wishes but was unable to attend due to illness.<sup>45</sup> The LSA also declined, unhappy with the remit, composition, and legal arguments that would be presented at the meeting.<sup>46</sup> It is unclear whether Ernest Bennett attended but if he did it was not in an official capacity as a member of the LSA.<sup>47</sup> He had argued that the 'proposed delegation [was] valueless [and] no good could possibly come of it'.<sup>48</sup> He had already met Clynes a year earlier and informed the LSA and the SNU that the government 'was unlikely to sanction the abolition of the Witchcraft and Vagrancy Acts'.<sup>49</sup>

The delegation was concerned with the way in which the Vagrancy and Witchcraft Acts were being inconsistently applied. They claimed that 'mediums are constantly employed at Church bazaars for the raising of monies ... and though the blind eye of the authorities is

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<sup>39</sup> Bennett, *Apparitions and Haunted Houses*, p. 392.

<sup>40</sup> Timms, 'Ghost-Hunters and Psychical Research in Inter-war England', p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Percy Redfern, *Journey to Understanding* (London, 1946), p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> See *The Two Worlds*, 4 July 1930.

<sup>43</sup> For Swaffer's spiritualist activism see Hannen Swaffer, *My Greatest Story* (London, 1945).

<sup>44</sup> For tensions between the SNU and the LSA see letters in *The Two Worlds*, 8 August 1930.

<sup>45</sup> SNU Deputation to the Home Secretary, 17 June 1930, Box 1, No. 6, College of Psychic Studies.

<sup>46</sup> For correspondence see SNU Deputation to the Home Secretary, 17 June 1930, Box 1, No. 6, College of Psychic Studies.

<sup>47</sup> The Home Office Files claim that Bennett did attend the meeting, but the papers of the LSA suggest otherwise.

<sup>48</sup> Secretary's memorandum re Mr Berry and Political Action, Box 1, No. 6, College of Psychic Studies, London.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from LSA to Ernest Oaten (SNU), 3 December 1929, Box 1, No. 6, College of Psychic Studies, London.

directed to them, the same people practising under other auspices are prosecuted'.<sup>50</sup> Clynes gave the delegation a sympathetic hearing recommending the use of a private members' bill 'and he assured the deputation that if a suitable Bill were presented to the House of Commons it would ... [have] the attention of His Majesty's Government'.<sup>51</sup> Yet he also detected no malice on behalf of the police and that 'the sole function of the Government [was] ... to protect the public against fraud, imposture and mental terrorisation'.<sup>52</sup> Members of the delegation argued that the SNU was better placed to police mediumship and fraud with Oaten claiming that '80% of mediums who have been denounced or exposed, have been denounced or exposed by spiritualists'.<sup>53</sup> Kelly, perhaps with tongue firmly in cheek, thanked Clynes and stated that he hoped a bill would 'materialise' in the near future.<sup>54</sup>

For spiritualists, the Clynes delegation and other meetings with sympathetic Labour MPs represented a further step in their long struggle against persecution. The SNU had established a Freedom Fund in 1917 building on campaigns that had first started in the Victorian period. Throughout the 1930s the cause of spiritualism and 'proof' of the supernormal was presented in the media, public meetings, and in local and national political campaigns. In the October 1930, Oliver Lodge and other spiritualists held a meeting at 11 Downing Street on 'the reality of the spirit world'.<sup>55</sup> This was organised by Ethel Snowden, the wife of the Labour Chancellor.<sup>56</sup> The Snowdens had no doubt been exposed to spiritualism during their political activism in Keighley, which had been a centre of spiritualist belief in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The 1930s was one of the periodic high-water marks of spiritualism with around 2000 societies in existence in 1934.<sup>57</sup> The decade ushered in a sustained period of sustained spiritualist political activism.

In the general election of 1929 another figure associated with the spiritual and the esoteric was returned as a Labour MP. Oliver Baldwin (1899-1958) was the son of the Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.<sup>58</sup> He became a socialist and member of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1922.<sup>59</sup> Baldwin had gained knowledge of rural folklore from the agricultural labourers of Worcestershire, which had reinforced his penchant for the mysterious rites associated with the 'old ways'.<sup>60</sup> He was an unsuccessful Labour candidate in 1924, but elected for Dudley in 1929, lost in 1931 and returned for Paisley in 1935 and 1945. Baldwin was homosexual and interested in both spiritualism and theosophy attending séances throughout the 1920s.<sup>61</sup> He had been close to Conan Doyle and they had many

<sup>50</sup> The National Archives (TNA), HO 45/14235.

<sup>51</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 11 July 1930.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, HO 45/14235.

<sup>53</sup> TNA, HO 45/14235.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, HO 45/14235.

<sup>55</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 31 October 1930.

<sup>56</sup> *Light*, 8 November 1930.

<sup>57</sup> G. K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London, 1969), p. 162.

<sup>58</sup> For Baldwin's political career see entry by David Howell in *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. XII*.

<sup>59</sup> For Baldwin's account of his conversion to socialism see Oliver Baldwin, *The Questing Beast: An Autobiography* (London, 1932), chapter 16.

<sup>60</sup> For rural folklore and witchcraft in twentieth century Britain see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford, 1999), especially chapters 11-15.

<sup>61</sup> For Baldwin's attack on the iniquity of the Witchcraft and Vagrancy Acts see *Psychic News*, 29 April 1939. For his homosexuality see passages in *The Questing Beast* and Christopher J. Walker, *Oliver Baldwin: A Life of Dissent* (London, 2003), p. 99, 206.

conversations about politics which they 'continued' in the séance room after the writer's death in 1930.<sup>62</sup> Baldwin also dabbled in freemasonry, but became disillusioned with its 'local bourgeois outlook and starched-shirt hypocrisy'.<sup>63</sup> In 1933, Baldwin published *Unborn Son* in which he claimed that the 'time was coming, and coming rapidly, when spiritualism ... will be the sole religion'.<sup>64</sup> He believed that when the 'spirit leaves the body ... it finds itself in the astral plane ... From the astral plane, shortly after passing over, we have the majority of spirit communications'.<sup>65</sup> Baldwin attended a gathering in Westminster in 1931 where the Columbia Gramophone Company planned to record the spirit voices channelled by the trance medium Meurig Morris. Other Labour MPs in attendance included Ellen Wilkinson, Alexander Haycock, Reg Sorenson and Charles Bowerman.<sup>66</sup>

W. J. Brown (1894-1960) the Labour MP elected for Wolverhampton West in 1929 told *Psychic News* in 1935 that he would often accompany Baldwin to séances. He claimed that Baldwin could apparently 'move' tables in the House of Commons. In his memoirs, Brown referred to him as a 'queer fellow' with a 'sixth sense'.<sup>67</sup> Brown himself felt that 'it seemed that there were more things in heaven and earth ... in which the laws of the physical world did not reign'.<sup>68</sup> Brown was drawing on a socialist scepticism of materialist conceptions of the world that labour figures continued articulate on political platforms, in the bars of Westminster, and in the domestic parlour well into the twentieth century. Alfred Short (1882-1938), the Labour MP for Doncaster and Yorkshire miners' official, elected in 1935 also held an interest in the spiritual and the supernormal and had addressed a number of services at the Attercliffe Spiritualist church in Sheffield.<sup>69</sup> George Lansbury continued to affirm his belief in the afterlife. At Short's funeral, he offered a touching tribute: 'there is no such thing as death. Our friend lives, and will live on, and on, and on'.<sup>70</sup> Lansbury remained a key figure in the 1930s at the centre of a network of socialists who believed in the supernormal, the esoteric and the fantastic, yet his biographers have tended to disregard, marginalise or completely ignore this aspect of his life.<sup>71</sup>

In 1930, William Kelly introduced the Spiritualism and Psychical Research (Exemption) Bill aimed at lifting the burden of fear of prosecution from the movement. The Conservative MP, Francis Freemantle, opposed the bill stating that he had always 'associated spiritualism with fairy stories'. With less than 40 MPs in attendance the Bill fell.<sup>72</sup> There was some attempt to build a cross-party coalition but outside of the Labour Party the only prominent voice that shared similarly unorthodox views were Sidney Peters the Liberal MP for Huntingdonshire and Edward Radford the Conservative MP for Salford South. The next opportunity for spiritualists to press their case came in the Rusholme by-election in 1933

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<sup>62</sup> See Baldwin, *The Questing Beast*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>63</sup> Baldwin, *The Questing Beast*, p. 159

<sup>64</sup> See review of *Unborn Son* in *Psychic News*, 2 September 1933.

<sup>65</sup> Oliver Baldwin, *Unborn Son* (London, 1933), p.147.

<sup>66</sup> For account of the performance see *The Two Worlds*, 3 April 1931.

<sup>67</sup> W. J. Brown, *So Far* (Aberdeen, 1943), p. 167.

<sup>68</sup> W. J. Brown, *So Far*, p. 126.

<sup>69</sup> For obituary see *The Two Worlds*, 2 September 1938.

<sup>70</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 12 May 1933.

<sup>71</sup> For example, John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 30 January 1931.



where Radford was subsequently elected.<sup>73</sup> A meeting was held at Longsight Spiritualist Church, Manchester in which a parliamentary sub-committee was formed. Each of the prospective parliamentary candidates was asked to define their position on the freedom of spiritualists. This was a stepping stone to even greater political activity.<sup>74</sup> Renewed activism would be spearheaded by the indomitable figure of Ernest Marklew whose activity on earth and in the spirit world had a profound and lasting impact on the spiritualist movement.

Ernest Marklew (1874-1939) was the son of a Methodist preacher from Rotherham. He became a committed socialist and a spiritualist at the age of seventeen and developed skills as a deep trance medium. Marklew was also a faith healer and claimed to have saved his son's life with the 'laying on of hands' after a doctor said he would die.<sup>75</sup> He became a propagandist for both socialism and spiritualism and faced hostile crowds in catholic areas such as Preston where he was pelted with bags of flour.<sup>76</sup> Marklew published his own spiritualist newspaper titled *The Medium* in which he conveyed his philosophical and political ideals.<sup>77</sup> While imprisoned for political agitation in 1906 he claimed that he had been accompanied by angels.<sup>78</sup> He was returned for Colne Valley in the general election of 1935.<sup>79</sup> His spiritualism also informed his progressive views on women. The spiritualist movement had long supported female suffrage and Marklew made a number of interventions on the social, political and sexual life of women. In *The Sacrament of Sex* he argued that 'sex is primarily an attribute of the soul' and that 'sexual love is not only pro-creative, but recreative; generative and re-generative'. He also noted that 'in ever increasing numbers, women are deliberately rejecting the servitude of the modern home life'.<sup>80</sup> In the broader spiritualist movement he had noted that 'our sisters have not had to fight with us for recognition of our rights'.<sup>81</sup>

Marklew always aimed to demonstrate the compatibility of socialism and spiritualism. His interventions developed in the context of debates within the spiritualist movement concerning the efficacy of such a relationship.<sup>82</sup> Yet non-socialists such as the spiritualist writer Toye Warner Staples suggested that spiritualists should 'believe in the *equality of opportunity*' but there 'will never be a monotonous uniformity – either on earth or in the next life'.<sup>83</sup> As a socialist, Marklew's conception of spiritualism went further: 'if all spiritualists were as keen for social construction as their spiritualism is capable of achieving it, we should have a different world'.<sup>84</sup> At the SNU Annual Conference in 1933 which included a debate on socialism he declared that it was his 'business to relate the philosophy

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<sup>73</sup> Radford had attended many séances speaking to his dead parents who to him had conveyed evidence of the 'afterlife' See *The Two Worlds*, 4 February 1938.

<sup>74</sup> See *The Two Worlds*, 20 October, 17 and 24 November 1933.

<sup>75</sup> *Psychic News*, 28 March 1936.

<sup>76</sup> *Psychic News*, 11 December 1937.

<sup>77</sup> In numerous editions he called on spiritualists to recognise the causes of poverty and inequality and promote the politics of socialism. For example, see *The Medium*, Vol 3, No. 8 August 1904.

<sup>78</sup> *The Medium*, Vol. 3, No. 10, 1906.

<sup>79</sup> For career biography see obituary in *The Two Worlds*, 23 June 1939. For his electoral campaign in the Colne Valley see reports of meetings and speeches in the *Colne Valley Guardian*, November 1935.

<sup>80</sup> Ernest Marklew, *The Sacrament of Sex* (Burnley, 1907) p. 18, 60, 189.

<sup>81</sup> *The Medium*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1907.

<sup>82</sup> For example see *The Two Worlds*, 28 February 1930.

<sup>83</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 28 February 1930.

<sup>84</sup> *Psychic News*, 8 July 1933.

of spiritualism to the social problems of our time'.<sup>85</sup> In the same speech, he castigated the Anglican Church claiming that 'it no longer counts in the great work of social construction except as a defender of class, property and privilege'.<sup>86</sup> Between 1933 and 1935 letters to *Psychic News* were indicative of the currents in spiritualism that were either supportive or critical of an alignment with the broader cause of socialism. The SNU retained its neutrality on party political affiliation, but the pages of the spiritualist press and debates at subsequent conferences suggest that there was an increased awareness of the pressing need to deal with rising unemployment and the threat of war.

Socialist spiritualists emphasised their beliefs and practices in both gatherings of the SNU, associated organisations and in meetings and rallies organised by the labour movement. Marklew and others felt that the practical application of their beliefs would lead to a more humane and socialist society.<sup>87</sup> To him, spiritualism had 'the moral power' to 'effect revolutionary changes'.<sup>88</sup> Hannen Swaffer shared a similar conviction in attempting to fuse spiritualism and socialism. He spoke at the Durham Miners Gala in 1933 claiming that 'spiritualism and socialism go together'.<sup>89</sup> The coalfields of Yorkshire, Durham, Lancashire and south Wales had a thriving network of spiritualist churches with new ones opening throughout the inter-war period.<sup>90</sup> Spiritualists were also increasingly active in the capital city. In 1934 a mass séance was held in the Aeolian Hall with over 500 people in attendance. The recently deceased Labour MP and Yorkshire Miners' official George Hirst 'spoke' through a medium: 'give my greetings to George Lansbury'.<sup>91</sup> At the opening of a new spiritualist church in Yorkshire in the previous year Lansbury himself claimed that his late 'wife's spirit' was 'urging him on in his work for his fellow men'.<sup>92</sup> At the SNU conference, Marklew again stressed the deteriorating economic and political situation and argued that the organisation had to face the problems and that spiritualism had to be 'practically applied'.<sup>93</sup> The conversation between socialists on earth and those on the other side became more pronounced in the context of economic depression and the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The agitation of Marklew and Swaffer continued to be discussed in spiritualist circles. The movement remained divided in terms of whether it should align itself to a formal political ideology. The discussions featured socialist and trade unionist spiritualists who pitched themselves against those who felt that the movement should remain outside of politics. Editorials, features and letters emphasised the parameters of opinion. One letter from Albert Clay of Leeds was indicative: 'unless we get a system politically and economically sound on truth, love and justice, religion under any banner fails. Spiritualism and socialism

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<sup>85</sup> *Psychic News*, 8 July 1933.

<sup>86</sup> *Psychic News*, 8 July 1933.

<sup>87</sup> See his article in *Psychic News*, 14 July 1934.

<sup>88</sup> *Psychic News*, 8 July 1933.

<sup>89</sup> *Psychic News*, 29 July 1933.

<sup>90</sup> For example a new church was erected at Easington Colliery in November 1935. The mayor of the Lancashire mining town of Leigh, W. Blackshaw, was also an ardent spiritualist. See *The Two Worlds*, 15 and 12 November 1935. In Durham in the inter-war period hundreds were attracted to the séances of Hunter Selkirk, a miner from Craghead. In South Wales the most celebrated mediums were Evan Powell from Merthyr Tydfil and the ex-miner Jack Webber (1907-1940). See Harry Edwards, *The Mediumship of Jack Webber* (Guildford, 1962).

<sup>91</sup> *Psychic News*, 5 May 1934.

<sup>92</sup> *Psychic News*, 2 September 1933.

<sup>93</sup> *Psychic News*, 14 July 1934.

go together'.<sup>94</sup> This discussion continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s and was never completely resolved. Socialists drew on the notion of the 'brotherhood of man' that was a foundation stone of spiritualism to take a position on 'any law which Parliament may pass'. This was also emphasised in an editorial in *The Two Worlds* stating that 'we belong to a definite kind of civilisation, and it is our duty to make the civilisation the very best possible'.<sup>95</sup> Socialist spiritualists responded to social problems through a mixture of ideology and esoteric belief. Their socialism was often informed by experience of struggle in the workplace and/or organisational and ideological affiliation but also guided and mediated by a spiritual 'inner light'.

In the 1935 general election campaign the SNU used prominent socialists such as Marklew and Swaffer to transmit its message and beliefs to a broader audience. Lansbury also produced copy for the spiritualist press. In one article he noted that 'I want mankind to follow the dictates of the spirit, which I believe tells us all that it is better to be a sharer than a taker'.<sup>96</sup> He expressed the belief that his wife and children were not dead and still around him.<sup>97</sup> An editorial in the *Psychic News* professed that the 'individual who is content to go to séance after séance, and is not concerned with the problems of unemployment, slums, malnutrition ... war... vivisection, does not ... understand spirit teachings'.<sup>98</sup> In Manchester, Keir Hardie 'spoke' at a séance and declared that 'he had lost faith in the Labour Party'.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, the *Two Worlds* featured articles and letters opposing the immorality war and agreeing with the sentiments of Oliver Baldwin who hated war 'more than anything else in the world'.<sup>100</sup> In the context of the 1930s, socialist spiritualists found confirmation of their suspicion of the ability of scientific orthodoxy and conventional religious belief to deal with the economic and social problems that were a feature of the contemporary world.

Marklew continued to denounce spiritualists who remained outside of the struggle for political reform: 'retreat to the séance room ... But remember, only the cowardly will remain there while the battle for Justice ... is raging in the outer world'.<sup>101</sup> He established himself as the spokesman for spiritualists in the PLP. In 1936 he told the Commons that 'I owe everything I have ... and all the hopes that I entertain ... to spiritualism'.<sup>102</sup> One of his early campaigns was an attempt to get the BBC to recognise spiritualists as an established religion and therefore entitled to broadcasting space. The BBC refused numerous requests from the SNU informing them that their Religious Advisory Committee decided that spiritualists did not 'conform to the broad stream of Christian tradition'.<sup>103</sup> At a spiritualist conference held in Manchester in 1938 Marklew told delegates that election to the Commons 'enabled him to bear testimony publicly to the value of spiritualism'.<sup>104</sup> He believed that 'life hereafter is a natural fact'.<sup>105</sup> For Marklew and his spiritualist associates in the PLP what was needed to

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<sup>94</sup> *Psychic News*, 29 July 1933.

<sup>95</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 18 November 1938.

<sup>96</sup> *Psychic News*, 7 September 1935.

<sup>97</sup> *Psychic News*, 30 November 1935.

<sup>98</sup> *Psychic News*, 23 November 1935.

<sup>99</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 29 November 1935.

<sup>100</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 11 October 1935.

<sup>101</sup> *Psychic News*, 2 November 1935.

<sup>102</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 314, 6 July 1936, cols. 863-991.

<sup>103</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 17 July 1936.

<sup>104</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 22 April 1938.

<sup>105</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 5 April 1938.

transform society was a more complete form of socialism that came from the mind, heart and soul.

Marklew passed to the other side and the 'socialism of the afterlife' on 14 June 1939.<sup>106</sup> The day after his 'transition' he 'appeared' at a séance in Middlesbrough conducted by Helen Duncan.<sup>107</sup> He emerged out of the medium's cabinet and declared 'It's Marklew'.<sup>108</sup> He then addressed the sitters: 'It is up to you Spiritualists to fight'.<sup>109</sup> In November, at a séance in Doncaster led by the medium Mrs Northage, he put in another appearance to comfort his wife who was also in attendance. His voice initially 'came' through a floating trumpet and informed the audience that he would materialise later in the proceedings. After some singing by the congregation Marklew 'appeared' from the Cabinet holding a rose that had been cut from his garden. He comforted his wife and appeared to hold a conversation with Mrs Marklew before returning to the other side.<sup>110</sup> In December, another recently deceased socialist, James Brown, the Labour MP for South Ayrshire transmitted messages through the medium Helen Hughes at a séance in Kilmarnock.<sup>111</sup> As dark clouds gathered over a Europe that was about to go to war, mediums, fortune tellers, ghosts, apparitions and haunted houses continued to convey their own particular sense of crisis.

### **Socialist spiritualists and the campaign against wartime persecution of mediums**

The outbreak of the Second World War gave further impetus to the spiritualist movement in terms of both its public popularity and its ability to press its claims in the House of Commons.<sup>112</sup> Spiritualists continued to write to movement publications promoting the view that spiritualism was compatible with socialism. A letter from Worcester published in *Psychic News* was indicative: 'it seems a strange spiritualist indeed who is not a progressive and a socialist'.<sup>113</sup> Marklew 'spoke' again from 'the other side' at a séance in Grimsby in 1939, voicing his concerns regarding the international situation: 'he had been in touch with General Foch, Earl Haig, Lord Roberts, and several others' and 'they were doing all in their power to secure peace'.<sup>114</sup> Back on earth his work in propagandising for spiritualism in parliament was developed by Thomas Brooks who was elected Labour MP for Rothwell in a by-election in 1942.

Thomas Brooks (1880-1958) was born in Castleford and had worked for many years in the mining industry, becoming a union official of the Yorkshire miners, and from 1918 had been president of the Castleford National Spiritualist Church.<sup>115</sup> He had experienced the power of spiritualism through regular séances in which he became a convinced advocate of life after

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<sup>106</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 23 June 1939.

<sup>107</sup> Duncan was the most infamous and divisive medium in this period. For critical biography see Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell. Last of Britain's Witches* (London, 2001). Hazelgrove has suggested that attacks on Duncan by psychic investigators were underpinned by class prejudice and misogyny. See Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, p. 279.

<sup>108</sup> *Psychic News*, 24 June 1939.

<sup>109</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 23 June 1939.

<sup>110</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 1 December 1939.

<sup>111</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 1 December 1939.

<sup>112</sup> For the popularity of spiritualism and associated beliefs see material in Mass Observation Archive, Astrology and Spiritualism 1938-1947, Box 1 8/1/A, University of Sussex.

<sup>113</sup> *Psychic News*, 29 May 1943.

<sup>114</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 8 September 1939.

<sup>115</sup> *Psychic News*, 16 December 1950.

death. Spiritualism complemented his socialism which had been forged at the coal face. The collective identity of coal miners was one that had been steeped in industrial struggle and the ever-present reality of death and disaster. Many collieries had resident ghosts, and belief in the supernatural was widespread in mining communities.<sup>116</sup> Brooks claimed that 'spiritualism was socialism with a soul in it' and that 'spirit people' guided his social and political beliefs.<sup>117</sup> On election to the House of Commons, Brooks worked to build support for the repeal of the Vagrancy and Witchcraft Acts. This had been given impetus by the prosecution of the medium Stella Hughes in May 1942. In July 1943 Brooks was part of another spiritualist delegation to the Home Office. He spoke to Home Office officials claiming that 'the people who have passed on are coming back to prove they are still alive'.<sup>118</sup> Herbert Morrison informed the delegation that he could not meet their demands and was concerned that any amendment to the Acts would leave room for further fraud.<sup>119</sup> The SNU responded, emphasising the importance of religious equality before the law, and concern that the police could arrest mediums in their homes and labelling them as 'rogues and vagabonds'.<sup>120</sup> Brooks penned his own letter pleading with Morrison to remember the progressive campaigns of which he had been involved as a socialist: 'You have been such a champion of freedom and justice that I cannot help but think ... you can meet our entirely reasonable requests'.<sup>121</sup>

The negative response of Morrison further energised the SNU. Brooks was at the centre of events and Swaffer proselytised on behalf of the SNU on public platforms and in the popular press. He agitated for a pardon for Hughes and accused Morrison of behaving like an 'obstinate bureaucrat'.<sup>122</sup> Swaffer had a well-established Home Circle that received messages from the spirit guide Silver Birch attracting politicians and celebrities.<sup>123</sup> The public fascination with spiritualism and the political struggle it engendered was personified by the Helen Duncan case in which the Scottish medium became a martyr for the cause.<sup>124</sup> Brooks was convinced of Duncan's abilities and had witnessed her materialisation of spirits.<sup>125</sup> The banning of a spiritualist meeting in Altrincham in 1944 was covered by the national press with Swaffer penning letters to the *Times* and meetings attracting a large number of campaigners.<sup>126</sup> He claimed that the suppression of spiritualism and the prosecution of 'genuine' mediums such as Duncan was dangerously close to the fascism that was being fought overseas.<sup>127</sup> Brooks spoke in the House of Commons and argued that 'would it not be better if the police attended to the suppression of crime, and left the

<sup>116</sup> For examples of haunted mines see Owen Davies, *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (Basingstoke, 2007) pp. 59-60.

<sup>117</sup> *Psychic News*, 11 December 1943.

<sup>118</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 5 November 1943.

<sup>119</sup> For details of content of correspondence between Morrison and Swaffer on the persecution of mediums see Swaffer, *My Greatest Story*, pp. 214-220.

<sup>120</sup> For letters of the SNU and the Home Secretary's replies see *The Two Worlds*, 24 December 1943.

<sup>121</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 28 January 1944.

<sup>122</sup> *Psychic News*, 5 June 1943 and Swaffer, *My Greatest Story*, p. 217.

<sup>123</sup> *Psychic News*, 3 March 1945.

<sup>124</sup> For notes by the defence relating to the court case see Charles Loseby Files on Helen Duncan, Society for Psychical Research Papers, SPR. MS 36, University of Cambridge.

<sup>125</sup> *Psychic News*, 17 March 1945.

<sup>126</sup> Brooks also raised the issue of the Altrincham meeting in the Commons on Halloween night. See *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 404, 31 October, 1944 cc. 646-8.

<sup>127</sup> For examples of such letters and a flavour of the meetings see *The Two Worlds*, 13 and 20 October 1944.

religious bodies to continue their work of educating people on higher moral and spiritual standards'.<sup>128</sup> The SNU established a Freedom Fund Fighting Committee to 'secure justice under the law for spiritualist mediums'.<sup>129</sup>

In February 1945, Brooks held a series of meetings with sympathetic MPs in Westminster. On this occasion Morrison proved to be more sympathetic.<sup>130</sup> Attlee, the Labour leader, also responded to the SNU, but felt that any future legislation should prioritise social and economic problems.<sup>131</sup> An editorial in the spiritualist press welcomed the coming fragmentation of the Coalition Government in which Morrison had presided over 'the most repressive persecution of spiritualism and mediumship, which this country has experienced since the Middle Ages'.<sup>132</sup> As in the 1935 election, in 1945 the SNU sent out questionnaires to potential candidates to canvass their views on repeal of the Witchcraft and Vagrancy Acts, attracting the support of over 100 MPs.<sup>133</sup> Spiritualists made supportive noises in favour of socialism in the general election noting that 'like the spiritualist movement, the Labour Party had risen from humble inauspicious beginnings'.<sup>134</sup> A further SNU delegation to the Home Office left unhappily with Chuter Ede the new Labour Home Secretary rejecting their appeals. This activity was connected to the rising number of prosecutions of mediums where the police were instructed to differentiate between what were perceived as 'ordinary fortune tellers' and spiritualist mediums who engendered 'complaints by the public', were obvious 'imposters' or were 'taking money'.<sup>135</sup> Social class was prominent in characterising and prosecuting mediumship. Those arrested were often operating in working-class communities where they attracted a responsive and largely non-judgmental audience.

In 1945 the parliamentary presence of spiritualism was given more bizarre character, temperament and colour with the election of George Rogers (1906-1983). He had joined the Labour Party in 1922 and his spiritualist convictions were strengthened by his experiences in the forces and the London blitz. His wife, Mary was a 'healer', medium, and fellow enthusiast of the supernatural. The Rogers' had a 'home circle' and visitors would often be welcomed by the antics of a mynah bird that would chirp 'vote Labour' when they entered the room. George claimed that his spirit guides had told him that he would be reborn five years after his life on earth ended. He used his wife's skills to contact dead politicians in order to predict the results of general elections. One spirit told him that he would be representing his constituency for twenty-five years. Mary's healing powers were also utilised by Rogers in the House of Commons and he later claimed that 'many of his friends in Parliament had been 'cured by her special skills'.<sup>136</sup> His election was followed by a rise in paranormal activity covered by the tabloid press in which poltergeists seemed 'to be

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<sup>128</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 404, 26 October 1944, cols. 331-2.

<sup>129</sup> For the statement of SNU policy on this matter see *The Two Worlds*, 3 November 1944 and *Psychic News*, 2 June 1945.

<sup>130</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 16 March 1945.

<sup>131</sup> *Psychic News*, 20 January 1945.

<sup>132</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 1 June 1945.

<sup>133</sup> For complete list of MPs in support of the SNU's position see *The Two Worlds*, 7 December 1945.

<sup>134</sup> *Psychic News*, 4 August 1945.

<sup>135</sup> TNA, MEPO 2/9158.

<sup>136</sup> *Psychic News*, 4 April 1970 and 5 March 1983.

particularly active in many parts of the country'.<sup>137</sup> Rogers' speeches in Westminster often made reference to 'healing', spiritualism and other aspects of the supernatural.

In 1949 Brooks drafted a Private Members Bill backed by Rogers but was unsuccessful in the ballot.<sup>138</sup> This was followed by the moving of the Fraudulent Mediums Bill by Walter Monslow (1895-1966) in 1950. Brooks spoke in support claiming 'we can never cease to be'.<sup>139</sup> Rogers claimed that there were more spiritualists in parliament than was commonly believed and that they held 'very prominent positions in the councils of the nation'.<sup>140</sup> This view had been sounded in recent years by Swaffer and the spiritualist press. Rogers might also have had Ernest Bevin in mind, the giant of the trade union movement and Labour Foreign Secretary. After the death of Bevin in 1951, *Psychic News* claimed that he had always been a spiritualist. According to the paper he had been involved in home circles from the age of ten. A local clairvoyant (a Welsh witch) had announced that one day he would 'lead millions'.<sup>141</sup> Bevin had been exposed to spiritualism during his activism in the Bristol Socialist Society (BSP). Ernest Oaten, the future president of the SNU was also proselytising for the spiritualist cause in Bristol in 1909 when Bevin was playing an influential role in the organisation. By 1910 the BSP had over 600 members including a number of spiritualists.<sup>142</sup> In his biography of Bevin, Bullock claims that its socialism was 'as much moral as economic ... more influenced by the generous love of humanity preached by William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Bruce Glasier, than by Marxist doctrines of class hatred'.<sup>143</sup> Carpenter greatly influenced the form of socialism that took root in Bristol meeting socialists in the city when passing through on his way to visit relatives in the Cotswolds.<sup>144</sup> The author, Robert Goldsbrough, a friend of Bevin's claimed that into the 1940s he was still involved in séances and seeking the advice of mediums.<sup>145</sup> On one occasion Goldsbrough had to leave the séance room when important political matters were being discussed in order to maintain secrecy in matters of international importance. Similar revelations were repeated by the journalist Fred Archer in 1967 who claimed that Bevin never ignored spirit messages.<sup>146</sup>

Popular interest in spiritualism continued after the war and was reflected in the increasing membership of the SNU which reached a peak in 1950 with 491 churches and 19,003 members.<sup>147</sup> In the same year, Mary Rogers summoned the spirit of the wrongly hanged Timothy Evans and the experience allegedly left her with rope burns around her neck.<sup>148</sup> The Fraudulent Mediums Bill was carried with no speeches being made against its adoption. The legislation provided protection for spiritualists, but led to very few prosecutions or

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<sup>137</sup> For an example in Salford see *The Two Worlds*, 4 January 1946.

<sup>138</sup> For details see *The Two Worlds*, 11 February 1949.

<sup>139</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 481, 1 December 1950, col. 1454.

<sup>140</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 481, 1 December 1950, col. 1454.

<sup>141</sup> *Psychic News*, 21 April 1951.

<sup>142</sup> Minutes of Bristol Socialist Society, 23 January 1910, 45434/1, Bristol Record Office (BRO).

<sup>143</sup> Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin Volume 1: Trade Union Leader 1881-1940* (London, 1960), p. 14.

<sup>144</sup> Sarason Bryher, 'An Account of the Labour and Socialist Movement in Bristol' (reprint from *Labour Weekly*, June 1929), NPM/A/17, BRO.

<sup>145</sup> *Psychic News*, 21 April 1951 and 5 May 1951.

<sup>146</sup> Fred Archer, *Exploring the Psychic World. A Chronicle of Experiences* (New York, 1967), pp. 69-71.

<sup>147</sup> Nelson, *Spiritualism and British Society*, p. 286.

<sup>148</sup> For a then contemporary analysis of the Evans case see Michael Eddowes, *The man on your conscience: An investigation of the Evans murder trial* (London, 1955).

convictions of 'charlatans'.<sup>149</sup> In return for his agitation, Brooks was made honorary vice-president of the SNU.<sup>150</sup> In April 1951 in a passionate speech in Westminster, Brooks claimed that his 'nine years in this House' had been used 'to secure the removal of the disability under which my spiritualist friends have been labouring for many years'.<sup>151</sup> A month later Brooks and Rogers were present at a dinner where 40 MPs witnessed the clairvoyant powers of Estelle Roberts and Helen Hughes.<sup>152</sup>

Rogers' contact with the spirit world now took on epic proportions. He claimed to regularly 'talk' with dead politicians, telling *Psychic News* that 'Disraeli is always around ... when I have gone to bed'. Palmerston was another 'visitor'. Rogers was later contacted by Bevin and Churchill: 'they told me what was going on in the Kremlin. I told the Foreign Office once without saying where my information came from. They did not act on it but later I was proved right'.<sup>153</sup> He proselytised for spiritualism in the Commons tea rooms and invited MPs to séances organised by the Marylebone Spiritualist Association. Rogers also claimed that there was an equivalent of Parliament in the spirit world. In 1951 he told a spiritualist meeting in London that 'man has lost his way ... more people are turning towards spiritualism as the answer'.<sup>154</sup>

Brook's retirement left Rogers as the spokesman for spiritualism in the Commons.<sup>155</sup> He claimed that 'spiritualism is no more than an extension of our knowledge of God'.<sup>156</sup> His spiritualism underpinned his advocacy for the abolition of capital punishment and he was involved in the cases of Ruth Ellis and Timothy Evans.<sup>157</sup> Another development that Rogers sought to advance was the creation of a University of Spiritualism. In 1969, he was part of a nine-member 'psychic panel' established by *Penthouse*, the pornographic magazine, in co-operation with the Ghost Club, to judge a £25,000 prize for the demonstration of 'genuine' mediumship.<sup>158</sup> In 1970 the Rogers marriage broke down with Mary claiming that her spirit guide, Sir John Simon, the first chief medical officer who had died in 1904 had 'warned in her advance' that George was leaving.<sup>159</sup> By the 1960s, Rogers' spiritualist socialism might have seemed eccentric and bizarre, but it sat easily with a popular resurgence of belief in the supernatural, the fantastic and the esoteric.

### **Secret Knowledge, the Occult, and a New Britain**

The belief and practice of socialist spiritualists was complemented by a group of Labour parliamentarians who dabbled in unorthodox philosophies and New Age teachings.<sup>160</sup> Yet unlike spiritualism, theosophy was a more exclusive and elitist entry point into hidden

<sup>149</sup> The first prosecution was of Charles Basham from London who was charged but cleared of 'purporting to act as a medium' and using a fraudulent device (cheesecloth). *Psychic News*, 16 February 1952.

<sup>150</sup> *Psychic News*, 27 January 1951.

<sup>151</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 20 April 1951, cols. 2163-9.

<sup>152</sup> *Psychic News*, 23 June 1951.

<sup>153</sup> For further examples of Rogers' contact with the dead see his obituary in *Psychic News*, 5 March 1983.

<sup>154</sup> *Psychic News*, 24 March 1951.

<sup>155</sup> For Brook's later life see obituary in *Pontefract and Castleford Express*, 21 February 1958.

<sup>156</sup> *Psychic News*, 24 January 1953.

<sup>157</sup> *Kensington and West London Times*, 15 July 1955.

<sup>158</sup> For details see *Psychic News*, 6 and 9 September and 25 October 1969.

<sup>159</sup> For profile of Mary Rogers see *Psychic News*, 4 April 1970.

<sup>160</sup> For an overview of New Age movements in Britain see Miriam Akhtar and Steve Humphries, *Far Out: The Dawning of New Age Britain* (Bristol, 1999) especially pp. 11-39.



knowledge and an understanding of the world that built on existing socialist critiques of materialist conceptions of human development. Socialist theosophists presented a more hierarchical version of brotherhood and enlightenment. Some of them demonstrated a more Fabian style of socialist politics that was underpinned by a clear sense of intelligence, expertise and a paternalistic attitude to the masses who remained ignorant of the eternal truths, hidden messages, and the mystical foundations of esotericism.

Many labour activists who embraced theosophy had come to the discipline through spiritualism. According to Alex Owen, interest in the occult 'was bound up with the new "social consciousness" at the end of the [nineteenth century]'.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, Linehan has noted that the 'desire to attain for the individual a higher state of spiritual 'Being' with greater capacities for human fellowship was an intrinsic feature of the socialist revival'.<sup>162</sup> Bevir has also argued that occult activism should be seen as a more general quest for truth within the socialist movement.<sup>163</sup> Yet historians have tended to view socialist engagement with theosophy as being contained in the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian eras.<sup>164</sup> As with the spiritualist current in the inter-war Labour Party, theosophy maintained its position within British socialism and a number of MPs continued to adhere to its general principles and precepts.<sup>165</sup> These included George Lansbury, Ben Tillett, Oliver Baldwin, David Graham Pole, Peter Freeman, Leslie Haden Guest, Henry Charleton and John Scurr.<sup>166</sup>

The Theosophical Society was formed in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky who had herself come from a background in mediumship. It was committed to the study of the occult and eastern religions, believing that human development was overseen by superior 'actual' and 'spiritual beings', the so-called 'masters', who had lived many lives and were located in the Tibetan Himalayas and other eastern locations. Theosophists also believed in the figure of a 'world teacher', who periodically appeared to direct human evolution to a state of higher consciousness. To theosophists, man had descended from spiritual beings and there would be a coming New Age of cosmic consciousness. The movement was underpinned by three broad objectives: to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, to further the study of comparative religions, and investigate the unexplained laws of nature.<sup>167</sup>

The British Theosophical Society was formed in 1878 and attracted a range of spiritualists and socialists. The most prominent socialist recruit was Annie Besant who joined in 1889. Others included the SDF activist Herbert Burrows, the feminist/socialists Dora Montefiore, Annie Kenny, and Margaret McMillan, the Guild Socialist Arthur Penty, the journalist A. J. Orage and Percy Redfern.<sup>168</sup> Socialist theosophists formed a range of opinions and positions

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<sup>161</sup> Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 18.

<sup>162</sup> Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism*, p. 24.

<sup>163</sup> Mark Bevir, 'Annie Besant's Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (1990), p. 66.

<sup>164</sup> For example see Dixon, *Divine Feminine*. Although Dixon does extend her focus into the 1920s in chapter 5.

<sup>165</sup> For a very brief sketch of Theosophist MPs see Kevin Tingay, 'The English Section and the House of Commons', *Theosophical History*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (1988).

<sup>166</sup> The role of socialists has been overlooked in the literature on twentieth century occultists. Many of the leading figures such as Crowley and Dion Fortune, along with many Wiccan groups expressed right-wing politics. See Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 360.

<sup>167</sup> For a collection of articles, letters and documents critiquing the beliefs of the Theosophical Society see files in SPR Archive, University of Cambridge.

<sup>168</sup> See Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism*, chapter 2.

relating to the society's claims. Writing in the 1890s Burrows felt that Besant had 'made a grave mistake in placing too much stress on occult phenomena and the messages of the Mahatmas [masters]'.<sup>169</sup> Yet Burrows retained a belief 'in the development and progress, not merely of the body, but also of the soul'.<sup>170</sup> Redfern was initially attracted by the notion of 'divine wisdom'.<sup>171</sup> Orage was embedded in occult practices and promoted aspects of theosophy in his writings and in the columns of the *New Age*.

Some socialist theosophists did not fully embrace the apparent elitism of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society. In contrast to Blavatsky other leading figures such as A. P. Sinnett wanted to focus recruitment on the upper class and aristocracy.<sup>172</sup> In a debate in the spiritualist press in 1931 one theosophist argued that the 'last thing Theosophy inculcates is a sense of superiority'.<sup>173</sup> Burrows had defended theosophy as a means of seeking an understanding of the world that went beyond the materialist nature of socialist thinking: 'I have found it explains many problems of life and thought and consciousness of which I had no explanation, and to which materialism never gave me any guide'.<sup>174</sup> Besant felt that theosophy would contribute to a new religion that would be 'like a spiritual League of Nations, not replacing present religions, but binding them all together'.<sup>175</sup> Similar esoteric groups such as the Mazdaznan movement also made incursions into working-class communities in the 1930s in industrial towns such as Halifax, Huddersfield and Keighley.<sup>176</sup>

The most prominent figure associated with theosophy in the inter-war PLP was George Lansbury (1859-1940). He had first been elected to the House of Commons in 1910 and was leader of the Labour Party between 1932-5. There have been a number of biographical studies of Lansbury but very little reference made to his theosophical beliefs.<sup>177</sup> Lansbury joined the society in 1914 and viewed the idea of a 'universal brotherhood' as being the basis of his socialism. In this context it is easy to see why socialists saw in theosophy a form of spiritual unity that was needed to underpin the economic basis of a more just society. In the 1920s and 1930s, Lansbury remained active in the Theosophical Society and contributed to their publications. The Order of the Star in the East had been established in 1911 to prepare for the coming of the 'World Teacher'. Subsequently, the society organised a series of 'Star Camps' bringing together Theosophists from around the world. In 1929 Lansbury attended a gathering of a Star Camp. In an interview for a theosophist journal he said 'the message is quite simple; the Kingdom of Heaven is within you. You will find God not outside yourself but within yourself'.<sup>178</sup> For Lansbury such gatherings around the camp fire were the essence of communal endeavour in the search for truth. Like Baldwin, Lansbury viewed this as a glimpse of a lost past before the corruption of the individual by industrialisation, urbanisation and capitalism.<sup>179</sup> In 1933 the Theosophical Society wrote to Lansbury offering

<sup>169</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 12 November 1894.

<sup>170</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 12 November 1894.

<sup>171</sup> Percy Redfern, *Journey to Understanding* (London, 1946), p. 41.

<sup>172</sup> Blavatsky's pieces in the journal *Lucifer* suggest an egalitarianism that was not shared by Sinnett. For Sinnett's views see his *The Early Days of Theosophy in Europe* (London, 1922).

<sup>173</sup> *The Two Worlds*, 3 April 1931.

<sup>174</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 12 November 1894.

<sup>175</sup> *Daily Sketch*, 5 February 1926.

<sup>176</sup> Akhtar and Humphries, *Far Out*, p. 13.

<sup>177</sup> For example, Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>178</sup> *News and Notes of the Theosophical Society of the British Isles*, October 1929.

<sup>179</sup> For Baldwin's critique of industrial capitalism see *Unborn Son*, chapter 20.

condolences for the death of his wife, reassuring him that the separation was merely 'a temporary situation'.<sup>180</sup>

When attending the funerals of socialist and labour activists Lansbury would pepper his dedications with references to theosophy. For him the soul passed over to the other side where peace, love and contentment prevailed. Through theosophy, Lansbury found a gateway that led to spiritual enlightenment that could not be foretold through conventional socialist texts. In 1937 he spoke at the European Congress of the Theosophical Society in Copenhagen. Theosophical ideas continued to inform his socialism. For Lansbury, the creation of a new kind of socialist society required not just economic and social transformation but also a 'revolution in the head'. The breadth, reach and promise of spiritual socialism in the inter-war period was also documented by Baldwin who wrote that 'enthusiasm was everywhere, the light appearing in the darkest places ... the day was dawning'.<sup>181</sup>

The second most prominent Labour figure who embraced the ideas of theosophy was Ben Tillett (1860-1943). He joined the Theosophical Society on 23 June 1916.<sup>182</sup> He might have been introduced to theosophy by Besant as early as 1889 when they worked closely together during the dock strike. Like Bevin and Walter Ayles he had also been exposed to the more esoteric side of the BSP. Burrows had delivered lectures to the BSP and there was a theosophical strand that drew inspiration from the eclectic socialism that it expounded. Another theosophist, Eileen De Crespo was also active in Bristol agitating for social reform and standing for municipal election as a labour candidate after the Great War.<sup>183</sup> Tillett and his wife would perform songs at BSP gatherings and in 1911 appeared in the BSP's 'Libertie Fayre'. This drew on the ideas of William Morris, Robert Blatchford and Edward Carpenter in recreating a medieval English village complete with a green, a well, with the participants dressed in period costume.<sup>184</sup> To the Bristol socialists and others in esoteric circles a more egalitarian 'merrie England' had been eroded by the forces of industrialism and urbanisation.

Tillett was also a freemason which was a further indication of his curiosity concerning the acquisition and promise of secret knowledge.<sup>185</sup> The gadfly politics and spiritual quest of Tillett can be read as a continuing search for solutions to political problems that embraced the material, the metaphysical and the supernormal. Like Tillett, socialist theosophists had been drawn to the ideas of the society through networks that had developed around Lansbury, Besant and Carpenter. This aspect of socialist culture was no doubt an exotic relief from the daily grind of wage negotiations, political meetings and debates in the House of Commons. Yet Theosophy also underpinned a broader spiritual and mystical dimension to the labour politics of the inter-war period.

### **The quest for spiritual socialist enlightenment**

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<sup>180</sup> Letter from Theosophical Society to Lansbury, 24 March 1933, Lansbury Papers, London School of Economics.

<sup>181</sup> Baldwin, *The Questing Beast*, p. 224.

<sup>182</sup> Theosophical Society Membership Registers, 1924-33, Theosophical Society Library, London.

<sup>183</sup> Akhtar and Humphries, *Far Out*, p. 20.

<sup>184</sup> Bristol Socialist Society Papers, 37886/2/1/1, BRO.

<sup>185</sup> For freemasonry in the PLP see J. Hamill and A. Prescott, 'The Masons' Candidate: New Welcome Lodge NO. 5139 and the Parliamentary Labour Party', *Labour History Review*, 71, 1 (2006), pp. 9-41.

Another member of the PLP who played a substantial role in the Theosophical Society was David Graham Pole (1877-1952).<sup>186</sup> Pole, like Tillett was an active freemason until 1914, when the war and association with other progressives signified a shift in his affiliations. He had been introduced to theosophy in 1907 by a Captain in the Queen's Rifle Brigade of the Royal Scots and like Lansbury and other socialists was attracted to its notion of a 'universal brotherhood'.<sup>187</sup> From around 1910 he worked closely with Besant as her solicitor and developed a life-long interest in Indian affairs. He travelled to India with Besant in 1910 and 1913. He became the first general secretary of the Scottish section of the Theosophical Society in 1910, holding the post till 1920.<sup>188</sup>

Pole's legal interventions on Besant's behalf were related to her activities as president of the Theosophical Society and some of its more controversial beliefs and practices; in particular the claim that a fourteen-year-old Indian boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti was the vehicle for the soon to appear 'super teacher'. Krishnamurti would reside in a mansion in the Scottish Highlands and be surrounded by twelve apostles including Besant.<sup>189</sup> The boy had been placed under her care with the consent of his father. However, the father changed his mind and started legal proceedings to return the boy, which Besant successfully fought, winning the case on a legal technicality. In January 1926 there was significant press coverage of the 'coming of the new messiah'. According to Besant, Krishnamurti would channel the power of the 'super teacher'.<sup>190</sup> However, the Krishnamurti case created tensions in the Theosophical movement and he later severed ties with the society rejecting his designation as 'world teacher'.

Pole's theosophical beliefs and quest for spiritual enlightenment had been strengthened during the Great War. He developed a close friendship with Lansbury and in a letter written in 1915 he expressed the feeling of spirituality that existed in the forces: 'I was very glad to find my ideas very generally held about death being merely a shaking-off of chains that bind us down here and merely a doorway into a fuller free-er life'.<sup>191</sup> In his diary entries and letters to his future wife, Pole made reference to the theosophical beliefs that they shared. In one entry he recounts a debate with members of the clergy in which he 'managed to get home ... T.S. ideas'.<sup>192</sup> While on active service he sought solace in theosophical literature such as Mabel Collins *Light on the Path* (1885) which was primer for those seeking to understand eastern wisdom and personal enlightenment.<sup>193</sup>

Pole remained close to Lansbury and often invited him to his home, where they would discuss both political and spiritual matters.<sup>194</sup> He stood unsuccessfully for parliament in

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<sup>186</sup> For Pole's political career see entry by David Howell in *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. XIII*.

<sup>187</sup> David Graham Pole, privately published autobiography, p. 179, ULS 5/8/1, Borthwick Institute, University of York.

<sup>188</sup> Tingay, 'The English Section and the House of Commons', p. 224.

<sup>189</sup> *Daily Sketch*, 5 February 1926.

<sup>190</sup> *Daily Sketch*, 11 January 1926.

<sup>191</sup> Pole to Lansbury, 24 September 1915, Lansbury Papers, Vol. 7, 218-19, London School of Economics.

<sup>192</sup> David Graham Pole Diary entry 20 September 1915, Pole Papers, UL 5/8/1, Borthwick Institute, University of York.

<sup>193</sup> See David Graham Pole letter to future wife 11 November 1915, Pole Papers, UL 5/8/1, Borthwick Institute, University of York.

<sup>194</sup> For further correspondence between Lansbury and Pole see letters in Lansbury Papers, London School of Economics.

1918, 1920, 1922, 1924, but took the seat of South Derbyshire in 1929. In the same year, Pole presided over the Annual Convention of the Welsh Theosophical Society in Merthyr Tydfil.<sup>195</sup> As with Lansbury and Tillett, Pole's philosophical meanderings were a response to periods of economic and political uncertainty that were signposted by events such as the Great War, the 1926 General Strike and the economic crisis of the 1930s. They also formed part of a growing interest in the inter-war period with the more esoteric aspects of Indian culture and the 'mysteries of the east'. Like Tillett, Pole was also a practising freemason attracted by its 'whole mystique'.<sup>196</sup>

The leading figure in Welsh Theosophical circles was Peter Freeman (1888-1956) who won the Brecon and Radnorshire seat for Labour in 1929.<sup>197</sup> Freeman was a theosophist and vegetarian who had changed his name from Bernhard to Peter 'because he was convinced that a Second coming of Christ was imminent'.<sup>198</sup> Freeman was another socialist and Labour MP who fully embraced esoteric ideas, alternative lifestyles and the doctrines of Theosophy. He had become a theosophist in 1909, established the Cardiff Lodge in 1911 and became a long-serving secretary of the Welsh section, representing the Principality at every world conference through to his retirement in 1944.<sup>199</sup> In 1926 during the 'Krishnamurti crisis' the Welsh section severed ties with Besant over claims of the arrival of the 'super teacher' although it is unclear what position Freeman took on this matter.<sup>200</sup>

In 1928 Freeman used his column in theosophical publications to comment on the 'coming new age': 'never before have the possibilities opening out before mankind been so important'.<sup>201</sup> He informed readers that his campaign for a seat in the House of Commons had been fraught with difficulty. The 'small fringe of unemployed miners in the south could hardly be expected to support ... a Chief Brother in Theosophy'.<sup>202</sup> He faced hostile press coverage in the 1935 election when he unsuccessfully contested Newport. He told fellow theosophists of a question asked at an eve of election meeting: 'is it true Mr Freeman, that you are a Theosophist ... that you think that we all evolved from a blade of grass?'.<sup>203</sup> Freeman was out of the Commons until re-elected in 1945 and concentrated on spreading the beliefs of theosophy in south Wales. At a meeting in Merthyr Tydfil in 1937 that he claimed that he was 'contemplating Theosophical activities in Aberdare'.<sup>204</sup>

In the midst of poverty and social crisis, theosophy like spiritualism, found willing socialist adherents. The small working-class membership of the Theosophical Society was mostly drawn from coal mining and textile districts particularly Nottinghamshire.<sup>205</sup> However, the appeal of theosophy and its emphasis on subjects such as astral projection, reincarnation,

<sup>195</sup> *News and Notes of the Theosophical Society in the British Isles*, December 1929.

<sup>196</sup> David Graham Pole, privately published autobiography, p. 161, ULS 5/8/1, Borthwick Institute, University of York.

<sup>197</sup> For a short career biography see Mike Bloxsome, *The Green Casanova: An Affectionate Biography of Peter Freeman, Maverick MP* (Newport, 2004).

<sup>198</sup> Bloxsome, *The Green Casanova*, p. 12.

<sup>199</sup> *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, May-June 1944.

<sup>200</sup> For factionalism in the Theosophical Society in this period see the *Daily Sketch*, 5 February 1926.

<sup>201</sup> *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, 7 December 1928.

<sup>202</sup> *Theosophical Society in Wales*, 5 June 1929.

<sup>203</sup> *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, December 1935.

<sup>204</sup> *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, January-February 1937.

<sup>205</sup> Theosophical Society Membership Ledgers 1920-1933, Theosophical Society Library, London. Membership details give addresses and occupations.

and the mythical city of Atlantis was lost on some miners. The theosophist Clara Codd recalled an exchange that took place when giving a lecture to a group of colliers: 'A big fellow at the back of the hall got up for a question. He wished to know if the lecturer had ever seen the ghost of a dead man ... I decided to say that I had. Huh! He said, 'the only spirits what you've seen have been inside a glass'.<sup>206</sup> Freeman no doubt faced similar ridicule in the south Wales coalfields, but he never hid his belief and commitment to the cause of theosophy. In 1944 Freeman envisaged a crucial future role for theosophists in the 'New Age when the ideals for which we have been working will be brought to fruition'.<sup>207</sup> A belief in the notion of a 'universal brotherhood' fitted well with the foreign policies of the Attlee administration that would begin the process of British decolonisation.

Leslie Haden Guest (1877-1960) was another committed theosophist in the PLP who joined the society in 1910. His father was a surgeon and a socialist and Besant and Burrows had visited the family home. He was instrumental in establishing the Central London Lodge of the Theosophical Society which was 'specifically devoted to the practical application of Theosophy to social problems'.<sup>208</sup> This approach fed into his published work, most notably *Theosophy and Social Reconstruction* (1912). Guest contrasted the promise of theosophical inquiry with the current social, economic and moral problems claiming that 'into this world of strife, confusion and pain, Theosophy comes like a flood of sunlight'.<sup>209</sup> For Guest, socialism could advance more adequately through an application of the sciences of the 'physical' and the 'superphysical'. Such a process would be enabled by the knowledge of the 'Divine Beings who rule and direct our evolution' and 'the World Teacher'. Theosophists needed to 'prepare the way, to be ready to carry out his command'.<sup>210</sup>

In 1914 Guest was elected General Secretary of the English section of the Theosophical Society.<sup>211</sup> He was elected Labour MP in 1923, joined the Conservatives in 1927, and went back to Labour in 1931 securing a seat in the Commons in a by-election in 1937. Two other Labour MPs in the inter-war period also highlight the appeal of theosophical esotericism in the PLP. John Scurr (1876-1932) was another associate of Lansbury through activism in the SDF and the ILP. He supported women's suffrage, pacifism, animal rights and guild socialism. Along with other theosophists he was active in the Indian Home Rule League. After some electoral disappointments he was returned to the Commons in the 1923 general election. He continued to be an advocate for theosophy and established the parliamentary animal welfare group with Freeman.<sup>212</sup> Scurr's politics moved rightwards prior to his death in 1934.<sup>213</sup> Henry Charleton (1870-1959) was the least active of the theosophist Labour MPs, but was indicative of the autodidact trade union stand of metaphysical socialist thought.<sup>214</sup> He had been an employee of the Midland Railway, an activist in the National Union of Railwaymen and elected to parliament in 1922. He kept his theosophical beliefs largely hidden, but no doubt shared with other more spiritual socialists a sense that social and

<sup>206</sup> Clara M. Codd, *So Rich A Life* (Pretoria, 1951), pp. 236-7.

<sup>207</sup> *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, January-February 1944.

<sup>208</sup> Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, p. 211.

<sup>209</sup> L. Haden Guest, *Theosophy and Social Reconstruction* (London, 1912), p. 14.

<sup>210</sup> Guest, *Theosophy and Social Reconstruction*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>211</sup> Tingay, 'The English Section and the House of Commons', p.224.

<sup>212</sup> *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, February 1930.

<sup>213</sup> See obituary written by George Lansbury in *Theosophical Society News and Notes*, October 1932.

<sup>214</sup> Tingay, 'The English Section and the House of Commons', p. 221.

economic transformation also depended on personal development and enlightenment. Socialist theosophy and a wider esotericism could lead adherents in strange political directions. Some embraced unorthodox economics such as social credit; others became sympathetic to moral rearmament, and some used theosophy to inform critiques of education, social policy, and personal development.

According to Howell, the 'formation of a National Government after 1931 ... had elevated the respectable and the cautious and had marginalised the radical and the deviant'.<sup>215</sup> Linehan noted that in the Edwardian period 'socialists aspired to bring to birth a new age ... based on individuals entering into more intimate spiritual communion with the cosmos'.<sup>216</sup> Yet throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s and 50s belief in the esoteric, the spiritual and the supernormal remained a curious current in the politics of the PLP. Both spiritualism and theosophy complemented a socialism that had been forged in factories, mines and fields, but also in the séance room, the lodge, and in the superstitions, rituals, folklore and beliefs of both a rural and industrial Britain.<sup>217</sup> To advocates of spiritualism and theosophy in the PLP the new socialist Britain of the mid-twentieth century would be transformative in all realms; the economic, the social, and the spiritual.

## Conclusion

Written in 1929, Egon Wertheimer's portrait of the Labour Party conveyed the atypicality of British socialism. He noted that 'utopian socialism and modern science, religious passion and rationalism here make strange but affectionate bed-fellows'.<sup>218</sup> Eight years later, Orwell castigated the 'prevalence of cranks' and an assortment of misfits including the 'fruit juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac' ... [and] Nature Cure' quack in the British socialist movement'.<sup>219</sup> Such denigrated characters remained emblematic of a socialist identity that remained immune to the statist and materialist politics of the Fabian Society, the Communist Party and various Marxist sects. The Labour MPs explored in this article could be found in the committee room, the conference hall, the union rally, but also located linking hands with mediums, stalking the parlours of haunted houses, having conversations with the dead, proselytising on spiritual enlightenment and discovering the esoteric secrets of the east. Working-class voters remained ambivalent about what Orwell would characterise as the more 'cranky' aspects of Labour MPs who hunted ghosts, attended séances, and believed that the hidden 'masters' of theosophy held the secrets to the universe.

Both spiritualism and theosophy were belief systems through which socialists could imagine, envisage, and realise a New Britain that went beyond materialist and statist conceptions of economic, social and personal transformation. Some even 'astrally travelled' to Mars and other planets where they witnessed different civilisations and alternative forms of economic and social organisation.<sup>220</sup> For socialist adherents of the esoteric, the spiritual and the

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<sup>215</sup> David Howell, *Mosley and British Politics 1918-32* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 190.

<sup>216</sup> Linehan, *Modernism and British Politics*, p. 6.

<sup>217</sup> For a short essay by Leslie Price on the connections between spiritualism and theosophy see *Psychic News*, 5 March 1994.

<sup>218</sup> Egon Wertheimer, *Portrait of the Labour Party* (London, 1929), p. 206.

<sup>219</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1975), p. 152.

<sup>220</sup> There were differing views within theosophy on the subject of Mars. Some believed it was uninhabitable, while others such as A.P. Sinnett felt that the planet had a hierarchical society.

supernormal, conventional economic approaches to society and social transformation proved to be limited, flawed and simplistic. Spiritualist and theosophist members of the PLP in the 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s looked back to a romantic, mysterious and mythical socialism that was sometimes at odds with the contemporary world. Yet they also looked forward and aimed to construct a British road to socialism that was both material and spiritual. Some of them retained their belief in socialism and the supernatural and others continued on a political odyssey that took them through a variety of positions, organisations and ideologies. More generally, spiritualism and belief in ghosts remained a core component of working-class culture into the 1960s and 1970s and the darker side of occultism and magic periodically alarmed commentators in the media.<sup>221</sup> The supernatural was depicted on screen in the films of Hammer, Amicus, Tigon, and the BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas*.<sup>222</sup> 'Ghost scares' such as the Enfield poltergeist case in 1977 captured the imagination and the curious could witness the mass mediumship of Doris Stokes in packed provincial theatres.<sup>223</sup> Similarly, theosophy and related doctrines and beliefs re-emerged as part of the New Age counter-cultural politics of the 1960s/70s. Such ideas were expressed and popularised by the rock music elite, including members of The Beatles, The Kinks, The Who, and Led Zeppelin.<sup>224</sup>

The historiography of the British labour movement has neglected and marginalised the spiritual and the esoteric in the post-Edwardian period. This has often reflected the politics and prejudices of canonical historians and the narrow focus of much labour history. Yet this exploration of Labour MPs who were elected to the House of Commons c1929-c1951 has shown that there were a range of socialist identities in the party that could not be easily categorised. The eccentric, the mysterious, and the other-worldly often sat easily with the rigours of constituency work, wage negotiation and parliamentary debate. The séance sitters, ghost hunters, spiritualists and theosophists combined their belief in practical politics with a penchant for the seemingly ludicrous, fantastic and supernatural. They shared George Rogers' view that 'it was one thing ... to believe in a truth; it was another to translate it into practical living'.<sup>225</sup> For them politics was indeed the 'art of the possible', but what was possible remained unconfined to the material world.

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<sup>221</sup> For details of the press coverage of 'witchcraft and devil worship' in this period, see Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, chapter 17.

<sup>222</sup> See Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester, 2006), chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>223</sup> See Guy Lyon Playfair, *This House Is Haunted: The True Story of the Enfield Poltergeist* (London, 2011) and Doris Stokes, *Voices In My Ear: The Autobiography of a Medium* (London, 1982).

<sup>224</sup> Led Zeppelin's guitarist Jimmy Page purchased the diary of the self-styled 'great beast' and occultist Aleister Crowley from Tom Driberg, a Christian Socialist and Labour MP, who engaged with aspects of the esoteric and counter-cultural. Driberg's grandmother was an occultist and he himself had been present at a ritual in which Crowley had 'tried to raise Pan'. See Francis Wheen, *Tom Driberg: His Life and Indiscretions* (London, 1990), pp. 54-55, 162, and Tom Driberg, *Ruling Passions: The Autobiography of Tom Driberg* (London, 1978), pp. 83-86.

<sup>225</sup> *Psychic News*, 24 March 1951.